



23 Days

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prose

Orchard's grip is tense, pen shaking, knuckles white, skin itching. His thoughts, full of step-by-step solutions; hands too slow to respond. Frustrating. His face stays scrunched into a panicked concentration, a migraine pushing his eyes out of their sockets. He rescans his exam, workflow ruined due to his muddled thoughts. He remembers clearly the day he learned this material, February 10th. It was snowing outside, -8 degrees Fahrenheit. He'd checked, on his phone, before he left the house, and chose his outfit accordingly. The exact problem the teacher used as an example was simple, and the answer was $\sqrt{3}$. The girl sitting in front of him that day was wearing a light grey shirt with six bright purple, glittery stars on the back in the shape of a cross. He remembers her as quite religious, and childish; her name is Annie Causa. She broke her dominant wrist right before Christmas break, on December 9th –

Focus. Focus. Focus.

He finishes the problem, and moves on to the next; a word problem, which requires more thought, more critical thinking. "A Ferris wheel is built such that the height h (in feet) above ground of a seat on the wheel at time t (in seconds) can be modeled by: $h(t) = 53 + 50 \sin(\pi/10 t - \pi/2)$.

(a) Find the period of the model. What does the period tell you about the ride?

(b) Find the amplitude of the model. What does the amplitude tell you about the ride?"

His breath starts to quicken, eyes running across the sentences several times. His brain catches on the phrase "Ferris wheel," and refuses to let go of it. Eight years ago, he went to an amusement park with his father for the first and only time, and he was terrified of the Ferris wheel

for its height. His father was gentle with him, explaining patiently that it moved slowly, standing and watching it with him for 12 minutes before Orchard believed him. When he was convinced, they rode it together, and Orchard stared out of the window in awe of the cacophony of light below. He was scared of everything, crying at the slightest inconvenience. He hoped his father was proud of him for trying something new.

His mind jumps again to Annie, tears burning the backs of his eyes as he remembers the way her wrist had looked, swollen to the size of a golf ball on one side, as she unwrapped the brace to show her friends on December 15th. Orchard's hands hit the table hard, and the nearly empty roomed echoes back. He's there after school hours; he can't take tests with others present. His brain can't handle the distractions. They trigger memories, thoughts and ideas that don't matter, leading him to forget the problem, the answer, the time, his process, his thoughts. The door squeaks when it's opened. Mrs. North comments every day she "wishes they'd oil it," but never makes a point to ask anyone to.

"Are you finished? It's been 35 minutes," she says, making her way to his desk. She's wearing a pencil skirt, which is too bright a blue to be considered professional, and a blouse that doesn't fit her shoulders, like always. Orchard isn't finished, in fact there's still 5 of the 30 problems left, but he nods anyway. She doesn't acknowledge him any more than that, as per usual, placing the paper on her desk and reorganizing the mess in the top left drawer. He's an inconvenience. Orchard hurriedly grabs his bookbag, struggling to zip it up before jogging out of the room.

Sarah Carlson's phone has a kitty keychain with four pink beads attached to the top left corner of her sparkly white phone case. Ryan's eyes shine bright green when he wears dark colors, but stay a neutral mid-grey when he wears pastels. Once, Allan broke a test tube and got a piece of glass stuck in his arm, and it was never removed because it was so small. So, there's a tiny bump in his arm, that he often picks at. Orchard has never spoken to any of these people. These are the things he thinks of when Mrs. North hands back their exams, a week later. A bold, black "D," a failing grade at his school, scars the top right corner of the first page of his test. This is the last exam before they take their final in less than a month. His brow furrows as he stares down at the mark; the ink has bled into the page a little, feathering out. If he was an artist it might bother him. Annie likes to draw, and she's mentioned something like that before.

"I really should've gotten the marker one," she'd said, waving

around her mixed media sketchbook with a grimace on her face. Her friend, Bea, nodded. She'd been wearing a jean jacket and denim shorts, which Orchard's sister would think was too much.

"23 days isn't enough time," he says, to his sister, Mala, once he's gotten off the bus and she's greeted him at the door. She's leaning on the frame, looking tired despite it being her day off. Orchard doesn't want to worry her, but she's the only person he has to talk to. After how poorly he did, he's sure he'll fail his final. There's no way he won't, and it scares him. All his effort will have been for nothing.

"You'll do fine. I can help you, if you want?" she says. Orchard doubts that; he shrugs. He's not smart enough for that, he thinks. Mala always offers to help, even when she's just gotten off a 12 hour shift, is backed up with art clients, and hasn't slept. She knows he needs her. "I'll make mac n' cheese, and we can make up a study plan," she continued, tone confident. Orchard barely hears her but nods, letting his bookbag slump to the floor. "What kinda art are you working on today?" he asks, forcing a more cheerful tone.

When their parents died, Mala moved herself and Orchard into an apartment, lucky she'd recently turned 18. She claimed her father's life insurance, put some into rent, some more into a cheap car, and put the rest into her savings account. Mala was sure she could keep up with rent on her own; she'd had a retail job for a while, and was in a decent position there. Orchard worried they were doing something wrong; was he allowed to be under her care like this? "We won't get in trouble, I'm an adult," Mala had told him. When they moved in, with what furniture from their parents' house they could fit in one moving truck, Orchard had bleakly picked which of the two small, identical bedrooms was his, and he and Mala had spent all day pushing too-big furniture up against the thin walls. They'd had microwaveable pot pies for dinner in silence, and he spent the following three hours doing his homework.

"Baked mac n' cheese is always better," Mala says, hours later, with a satisfied hum. She pulls her legs up to cross them in her yard-sale armchair, stuffing another bite into her mouth. Orchard just nods, pouring over the scribbly notes he'd written on November 4th last year. He's unsure how well he'd need to remember derivatives for the final. He's not sure how to delegate time to each topic. He asks Mala if she

remembers her high school math final; which, of course she doesn't. That was six years ago.

His mom would know more. His mom would tell him to study everything equally, just in case the teacher decided to be a bitch about it. She'd laugh and tell him that he'll pass no matter what; that he's a smart boy and always has been. He's not smart. Her saying that made him feel bad about his mediocre grades. He didn't want to disappoint her.

"It's called hyperthymesia," the doctor had said. Orchard was playing with the toys in the corner of the room, especially the spindly one, with the metal, noodly paths for the wooden beads to travel along. His mom asked more questions: "What does that mean? Is it going to be permanent? What will he remember?" Orchard wasn't paying attention – the fish in the tank across the room had intrigued him, particularly those bright orange goldfish that he'd wanted badly for his most recent birthday. He passed the doctor and his mother, abandoning the toys to press his hands against the glass and stand tall to look at the fish. They darted away from the intrusion, and he followed them with his eyes as they weaved around the fake plants, and the plastic shipwreck.

His fascination was interrupted by mention of medication, and he'd turned abruptly to shout, "I can't swallow pills, Mommy!" twisting his lips into a pout and looking at the doctor fiercely. He had to take pills once when he got really sick, when he was three, and he screamed at his mom when he discovered one hidden in his yogurt. He slammed his fists into his high chair and gotten his food everywhere. His mom cried.

She cried too, when their car crashed into a wall, because his father had a heart attack while driving, and died on the spot. He'd been born with a heart condition, and the tired organ had finally given up. His mom screamed and tears decorated her face, tinged pink by the blood dripping from her hairline. She had glass from the windshield sticking out of her, making her sparkle. Orchard stared at her once his vision stopped swimming, captivated by shock, unable to tear his eyes away. Mala had smacked her head into the back of his mom's chair and blacked out, but suffered no long-term injuries. His mom bled out before help arrived minutes later, sleeping peacefully with her head rolled back against the headrest. Orchard stayed silent, buckled safely in his carseat. He was ten, but he was so small and light that he still needed one. He didn't scream, or cry; not until an ambulance arrived. He was frozen, unable to process what had just happened. The volume of the sirens was deafening, sending him into a fit, and he screamed at the top of his lungs

wordlessly. He pulled at his seatbelt until he unclipped it, but was unable to get up because his father's seat was so far back.

Orchard screams again, now 17, in his room, trying to fall asleep. The alarm clock on his nightstand reads 2:36 AM, and it's pitch black. Mala scrambles out of bed and through Orchard's open door, clumsily rushing to his side. He practically falls into her embrace, clinging to her like she'd disappear. He's stopped screaming but now he's bawling, sobs wracking his chest. "Shh, it's okay," Mala says, her voice hazy though she's trying to sound reassuring. She sounds the same.

As the sirens cut off in favor of the metallic cracks of a stretcher being opened, Mala had woken up to Orchard's tantrum, and he'd instantly quieted. He didn't resist her as she picked him up from the carseat, refusing to let the paramedics lay a hand on him. She'd jiggled the locked car door, which had confused him. All you had to do was press the button, why was she having so much trouble? She'd screamed, face angry. Glass had somehow found its way to her left shoulder, and Orchard, without thinking, had pulled it out and cut his fingers open. Mala had shouted at him, ripping it from his grasp and cutting herself too.

"It's okay, I'm here," Mala repeats, rubbing Orchard's back and managing to sit on the bed beside him. His breath is ragged, and he buries his face in her neck, the chain around it scratching at his cheek. Of course she's here, where had she been before? The clock decorating the otherwise barren wall which bridges their doorways fills the silence, ticking loudly and fulfilling its purpose. They'd gotten it from one of Mala's friends, who received it from her parents and didn't want it. The clock requires triple-A batteries.

Orchard never does fall asleep, even after Mala brings him a drink and goes back to bed herself, hoping that he'll be okay. He isn't, though he pretends that he is. He desperately tries to distract himself, and to tire out his brain; he works on math. Going through his newly made study plan, starting with the material he learned on August 23rd of last year. They'd done a group activity the week before, introducing themselves to the class. He'd told them his favorite color, because he couldn't think of anything else. He found the material easy, and made it a point to tell Mala, "This year is going to fly by." This year was going to be so easy. He was going to graduate a year early, and then he'd graduate college a year early, and then he would have an extra year.

“It’s hard for him to focus. He gets distracted by random memories – Even ones from when he was a baby! He really can’t help it,” His mom had gone on and on, listing off the symptoms of his condition to an uncaring principal. She told them how he had trouble remembering things like math and couldn’t help remembering the first time he’d tried green beans, or every single one of his birthdays in detail. He was starting fifth grade soon, and his mom had decided he required special treatments after his grades began to flatline. He’d protested; he didn’t want the attention. But, she didn’t care. He was quiet while they’d talked, sitting in a chair in the corner. He had excellent grades before, and he wasn’t sure why he was suddenly having so much trouble. He felt stupid, because he’d been doing all his work and still didn’t understand things like long division and fractions. The lamp on the principal’s desk was dim, and the folders on her desk were askew.

Once they’d left the school, his mom looked back at him from the front seat of the car with a soft grin on her face and asked, “Wanna go to the park? We could meet up with your Dad downtown and get lunch after.” Orchard had perked up a bit at the suggestion and nodded, smiling back at her. He sometimes wishes that he was still young enough to ask Mala to go to the park with him. He wishes they had more time together in general. When Mala was starting high school and he was younger, they played video games together and she tried to get him to draw. Now they never have time.

Orchard can’t listen to music while he works, because it’s too distracting. Especially if it’s a song he’s heard before. The first time he listened to Mala’s favorite song, he’d been in the car. They were going out to eat, for the first time in weeks, and she had played it from her phone. He didn’t like it, but he liked the way she’d shouted the lyrics and turned to grin at him every so often. He’d smiled back at her, sincerely, and even laughed a few times at how happy she was. They’d gone to a restaurant, rather than getting fast food, and it was nice. He’d worn one of her hoodies, which was black with color block sleeves; bright turquoise. They’d gone home, watched a movie, and she’d fallen asleep before it ended. He made her get up long enough to walk to bed, her grip on his hand loose as he guided her there.

The memory comforts him as he refocuses on the problem he’s finishing.

“Jamie went on a road trip with some of his friends. The trip

to the campsite took five hours and the trip back took four hours. He averaged 35 km/h on the return trip. Find the average speed of the trip there.”

That’d be nice, he thinks. To go on a road trip. He’ll ask Mala in the morning if they could save some money for one. Hopefully he’ll have time with her rushing off to her morning shift, him tiredly getting ready for school; Mala tossing a granola bar at him. At 8:03 his bus will arrive, and he’ll fall asleep with his face slouched against a dirty window.

And in the days following, he’ll keep studying, and he’ll trick his brain into remembering the unimportant specifics of basic calculus. He’ll graduate in June, so his life isn’t wasted, and neither is Mala’s. He’ll go to college, he’ll get a great job, and he’ll move the two of them into a better place – a house, and Mala could focus on art. That’s the way it’ll go. He needs it go this way. “23 days is enough time,” Orchard says, quietly to himself, with finality.